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Review: The color of power: Racial coalitions and political power in Oakland by Frédéric Douzet, translated by George Holoch

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Frederick Douzet's account of urban racial politics in Oakland, California attempts to frame the racial geopolitics of California via Yves Lacoste's geopolitical framework. Suggesting that American political geographers focus too much on international politics, Douzet contends for a return to Lacoste's classic definition of geopolitics as simply the study of how groups compete for power over territorial space—whether as large as nation-states in an international order or as small as neighbourhoods in cities. Douzet's study of Oakland thus claims to be about how African Americans in Oakland wrested power from a white oligarchy in the 1970s, only to be faced with the prospect of founding multiracial coalitions in the 1990s due to the increase of Asian and Latino immigration. Yet her book fails to bring the potential of her argument about California's geopolitics to full realization. Moreover, the work is plagued by Douzet's seeming unwillingness to cite existing work in American urban studies.

Douzet's argument is at best unusual, for she suggests that race determines coalitions in Oakland without questioning how race itself is formed by political structures. In particular, the relationship between race and California's unique grassroots state initiative process is unclear. Douzet suggests that African Americans came to power in Oakland in the 1970s because they seized the opportunity to construct an autonomous black public sphere and were subsequently blamed for incompetence over the next two decades because they were unable to create jobs, reverse white flight, and improve schools. There is a connection between the ambivalence of black power and the state initiative process, however: Douzet suggests that the late 1970s were "bad timing" for such black geopolitical activities because Californian voters passed Proposition 13 in 1978, limiting the collection of property tax that African Americans could have used to expand the public sector. And yet, Douzet does not explore that argument; instead, she moves to the arrival of more Asian and Latino migrants in the 1980s that allegedly developed perceptions of a black underclass in Oakland while whites, Asians, and Latinos formed a multiculturalism that excludes blacks. As Douzet emphasizes, these new racial exclusions led in the 1990s to the redrawing of electoral district lines to include a growing Asian-Hispanic coalition, which culminated in the election of Jerry Brown, a white mayor, in 1998. What is curious about this account, though, is that the root cause does not in fact seem to be that an Asian-Hispanic coalition pushed blacks out of leadership. What is underexplored is the particular geopolitics of California's state initiative process that structurally exacerbated racial tensions at the scale of the city and the neighbourhood.

Douzet's lack of engagement with American urban studies is also curious, even if she is writing for a French audience. After all, in her copious discussions of the African American "underclass," there is not a single mention of the debate between William Julius Wilson and Loïc Wacquant, the latter an urban sociologist who is hardly a stranger on the French scene. Instead, Douzet problematically assumes that African Americans have formed an underclass in Oakland that contributes to violence in educational institutions and crime on the streets. So too, Douzet's critique of Jerry Brown is that his gentrification plan was not the whole answer to the city's problems because it did not factor in education and crime. However, the question that arises from the gentrification literature would be whether Brown's efforts at gentrification intensified racial tensions because gentrification represents a

displacement of populations from housing due to the move-in of a new “gentry” class. Finally, the claims in *The color of power*, though rigorously researched, are based largely on the statements of politicians and police with little critical interrogation of how such discourses exacerbate the racialized geography about which she is so concerned. For example, in a discussion of violence in schools, Douzet’s main sources are the police, not the students, yet she uses the police’s response about racial tensions to explain the alleged violent inclinations of the students. Methodologically, this is an odd move, for one would think that the students should be asked to explain themselves.

None of these criticisms detract from the fact that Douzet has a meticulously researched account of racial geopolitics in Oakland. However, one wonders ultimately whether her Lacostian framework costs her more than it contributes, for she seems to rely on a geopolitical paradigm to the exclusion of existing urban research in social and cultural geography. In the end, then, *The color of power* claims to be about racial coalitions when it is really about Californian geopolitics, which would have been a more interesting framework that could have better tied the whole argument together.

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